

June 26, 2009

Friday Evening

Title: [Ihsan: The Essence of the Spiritual Culture of Islam](#)

DVD title: Ihsan: The Beautification of Islam and One's Character
through Sufism and Its Unique Practices

A lot has been going on in the name of Islam in Iran as you well know. These hypocrites, which we heard about yesterday and which are not reported about on American television, are killing young people with swords and knives, and many of them are being held. They are calling for the execution of these [young] people who have “been influenced by others from the outside.” I’m not going to get into the politics of it; but the spirituality is obviously lacking. The *raison d’etre* these people use began with Khomeini when he implied that there could be a representative of the 12th *imam*, meaning himself, as the “supreme leader.” Out of this perversion comes a lot of other perversions. They use incredible lies and incredible tactics that they justify.

Maybe at the root of some of this is a principle in Islam, a general feeling that Islam envisions for a human being a discipline for their whole life. And greed, which has characterized certain social and political systems from the earliest times, and certainly expressions of religion, has become so dominant in the world that in a way people turn a blind eye to it. Only when there is such oppression does it get any play in the media for a brief period of time until the next story comes. For whatever good a person like Michael Jackson did, which in the long term I have a lot of questions about (even if he became a Muslim near the end of his life), I don’t think there is any denying that this person was a caricature of a human being. In a way, it fits the world we live in because we see a caricature of the values of a very profound and deep religion in Iran today. They are evil manifest, wearing the cloak of piety. I also think that a real Muslim should have not only

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

www.circlegroup.org

some kind of discipline in their lives, a material discipline as well as spiritual.

I met a man yesterday in Georgetown, a political economist. He was from Jordan, an older man, probably 10 years older than I am. He spent his life in the oil industry and energy, a consultant for World Bank and IMF and other organizations. Part of our conversation was him giving me his comments on capitalism. Whether I agreed or didn't agree with him is not as relevant as the fact that the subject was turned to greed. It could be greed for attention, like a person like Michael Jackson had, or greed for money, or greed for power. It's all the same greed. There's no denying that people have many differences in temperament and attitude, and certain people find themselves much more comfortable with greed than others do. Many people find it much easier to take than to give. As we can see, even among people who are supposedly educated and into spirituality, and supposedly their occupation in life is to concentrate on the spiritual side of existence, it's obvious that even the best among any of us who focus our life on spirituality are going to remain somewhat attached to some other occupation rather than just spiritual practices, as evidenced here.

The question is, "Why are we attached to those things?" Are we attached to them for the sake of the society we are a member of? Are we attached for the sake of justice, goodness, compassion, and mercy? Are we attached to our work, jobs, skills, and interests because not only do they bring us some kind of fulfillment, but they also fulfill some good purpose that Allah has placed us on this earth for? Or are we attached to them because we can use our inner life as a cover for greed for power, name, fame, and money?

Prophet Mohammed (sal), in teaching on *iman* and on *taslim*, submission, said, **"As to the beautification (*ihsan*) of conduct, so render your service unto Allah as if you see Him; even though you do not see him, yet He sees you."** This is called the Hadith of Jibreel: this *ihsan*, this *hasana*, this beauty, this attitude of acting as if you are in the

presence of Allah, and Allah is seeing you. The word *ihsan* here is translated as beautification, pleasantness, beauty—not fear. Act in a beautiful way. This is the most beautiful method of devotion and service to Allah.

This is the essence of the spiritual culture of Islam. Without that *ihsan*, one is hard put to find Islam. That’s why we say, “*Iman, islam, ihsan.*” Service to Allah in the most comprehensive form includes not only the religious service (praying to Allah, remembering Allah only in spiritual terms), but also it applies to our human conduct throughout our whole life. This is why we strive to raise our children in certain ways, and hope and pray to Allah that our children represent the best. The most refined, the most cultured people from a spiritual point of view are those who naturally come to abide, and who purposefully strive to abide by the will of Allah Swt in the way they act, think, speak, and believe—again, in beautiful ways: *hasana, ihsan*—not just ostensibly pious ways, not just ways through knowledge, wisdom, and fact. Especially when you listen to these ayatollahs and mullahs twist the Qur’an and the Hadith, you wonder who could, other than they, themselves, believe it? Certainly not the educated people of Iran, who are among the most educated and refined people of knowledge in the world.

Also this applies to Sufi teachings, mysticism. Sometimes *ihsan* represents Tasawwuf. In many of our talks and lectures, and in ISRA, the concept of Islam is put forward as Sufism, mysticism. Sometimes it’s put forward as consciously realizing at some point in your life *qurb*—that it is necessary to approach Allah, to intentionally move toward Allah. It is not that Allah is a being, but it is to move toward awareness of that Divine Presence that is also talked about in *ihsan*. That moving, in and of itself, is the foundation of Tasawwuf because it is *tariqah*: a pathway, a roadway, a *suluk*/journey to Allah, in Allah, and by Allah. So over the centuries, people have called it *ihsan*, and some people call it *qurb*, and some people call it *suluk*. But it is most often referred to as Tasawwuf—what we purport to practice.

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

www.circlegroup.org

It is true among the Muslims Sufis or mystics, just like in other civilizations and spiritual paths, the practices of the Sufis and the uniqueness and peculiarities of the practices are not just openly revealed to anyone. They are often restricted and detailed to the circle of seekers, to the disciples, to those who have had a blessing or *idhn* to practice conferred upon them, because they have purchased that right. They have sold themselves to this process. Of course, these things are kept secret, not because it would be a scandal if they were known, but because the average person on the street wouldn't understand why we sit for hours, or we recite for hours, or we pray 5 times a day and in addition have three nights a week when I speak. We serve others before we serve ourselves, and often find ourselves renouncing, abstaining from, or being happy with things less than the average person would be, the amenities of life. In addition, the average person just doesn't believe in the personal experience of a spiritual experience. They never think about it. I always remember what Isa once told me about working in the pottery. When he would be self-reflective or talk about doing things better, people would think he was crazy. Nobody ever thinks that way. So, those among us sometimes think it is better to conceal certain things from those who are unable to appreciate them.

On the other hand, when you look at what is put forward as spirituality and religion, it becomes more and more important in the world we live in, at least not to conceal that there's an alternative. This tendency to fulfill the historical kind of secret sacredness of the practices is important; but at the same time, it is very important to draw a distinction between what a real Sufi is and why, in terms of *ihsan*, *hasana*, beauty, appreciation, goodness, inclusivity, justice, mercy, compassion, love and of selfless service of human beings, *fī sabīlillah*/for the sake of Allah. Also, if someone sees that you know something they don't know, they become curious about it, and they want it. So it may in some way be good that people think, "Those Sufis know something I don't. How do I find out?"

You have to be a certain type of person, and act in a certain way, and prove yourself. At
Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

least that's how it used to be, and that's how it should be. But sometimes, Sufism has become like an amusement park, where you buy a couple of tickets and get to ride the ride for a while.

Precisely because we all have different temperaments and attitudes, and since that's the way it has been since the beginning of time, I think it's very much a blessing and to the credit of Islam that without respect to temperament, history, and culture, every Muslim agrees to at least a minimum common practice and value system, and a minimum common world view. That's pretty amazing when you think about it. That minimum necessity not only touches us spiritually, but also it affects our material attitudes toward wealth and helping others with *sadaqa* or *zakat*. It tells us about our duties to our brothers and sisters how are ill; our duties to our brothers and sisters who have some need of some kind. [It tells us about] our spiritual responsibilities that we practice in common in the *ummah*. It tells us about our responsibility to those who come after us, the young people, our children.

In order for us to understand it, I think it's good to realize that at least among the best Muslims, all agree that the evidence of and the means to and manifestation of what a good Sufi, a good Muslim is, is in the Prophet Mohammed (sal) and his companions—all of whom had different temperaments. If we look at their lives, you'll find people who were patient, who were hot-tempered, who were soldiers, who were peacemakers, women and men who fought side by side in battle, women who commanded the total respect of Rasūlallah (sal). The Prophet (sal) was very clear in telling people the good news that such good people—people who appreciated the beauty, love, the duty, the qualities of justice, mercy, compassion, patience, forgiveness, generosity, and compassionate rulership—all these people no matter what their temperament (just like we have different temperaments), he used to say they were all people who belonged to Jannah. They were

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

the people who belonged in paradise.

As we go through the lives of the *shuyukh* from the time of the Sahaba on, we find there were people who were more ascetic and people who were more worldly. Ubadaiyya Uhrar (ra) was a great landowner. There were people in the early days like Abu Dharr (ra) who was an ascetic mystic. There were people of every ilk who were Sufis, but all of them strived and struggled and manifested certain qualities. I told you the story recently about the Bedouin who visited the Prophet (sal).

The Bedouin wanted to know what the minimum duties were to achieve Paradise. The Prophet (sal) said, "Faith in one God, prayers five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, the pilgrimage, and the payment of zakat if you have the means." That Bedouin embraced Islam. He burst out and said, "By Allah! I shall do nothing more and nothing less." When he left, the Prophet turned to his followers and said, "Whoever wishes to see a man of Paradise, let him look at that man."

I remind you at this point that if you went out last night you saw the sliver of a moon. Today is about the 3rd of Rajab. We are already at Rajab. Many things happen during Rajab. I hope you all have your papers on Rajab and Shab'ān. There is a lot to be done in this month, special prayers to be made. [But it is] not just [a time] to do special prayers, but a time to prepare for Ramadan, a time to remember who you are and to reflect on the nature and character of people like Imam Ali (ra) (whose celebration is 13 of Rajab). It is a time to remember why it's important that we have a whole month coming, preceded by these two months, where a lot is to be done so that we can be called people of Paradise. Whether it was a wealthy person like Sidna Uthman (ra) or an ascetic like Abu Dharr (ra), neither of them ever neglected their prayers, their *wudu*, their fast, their pilgrimage, or their *zakat*. Both of them were deeply spiritual. It's not that people like Abu Dharr (ra) or

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

Abu Darda (ra) and others who liked that ascetic way of life got *idhn* from the Prophet (sal) to lead a life of being a recluse or to fast perpetually. On the contrary, Rasulallah (sal) enjoined them to get married and reminded, ***“You have obligations even with regard to your own body.”*** According to Islam, we don’t belong to ourselves. We belong to Allah.

It’s not permitted to misuse the trust that Allah has placed in us, even in the shape of our own body. We shouldn’t intoxicate ourselves, abuse ourselves, cause ourselves illness. We shouldn’t pierce or deface ourselves. It’s disrespectful. Allah created us in a certain way and made us beautiful in certain ways. To understand the why of this is so important. In the Grand Mosque in Medina during the time of Rasulallah (sal) there was a special area called the *sufa*. It was somewhat away from the main prayer area. It was a center of training and education, and functioned under the personal supervision of Rasulallah (sal) (like our school, under his or her (the teachers) control). A considerable number of Muslims occupied that area, and they devoted part of their time during the day to learn about Islam, not only in matters of relationship to Allah, but in matters of relationships with others in society. They worked to earn their necessities of life just enough so that they wouldn’t be parasites on society or a burden, but enough just to get along. During the night they passed the time, like many people, in the observance of *nafl* prayers and *muraqabah*.

Whether one calls that portion of the *sufa* or *masjid a tekkia*, a *khanaqah*, or a *zawāya*, there is no doubt that the people of that *sufa* were more attached to spiritual practices than to material avocations. [There were] more attached to spiritual practices than just mere religious action, coming and going to do prayers back and forth. We might never be able to know all about the practices Rasulallah (sal) had given to these mystics. We know enough to say they must have varied according to the temperament of the people. They varied according to the capacities of each of the individuals. Yet they were very private

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

teachings. We don't know a lot about them. But it was a small space occupied by people who wanted to know more. They weren't so concerned with earning lots of money, just enough to get by, to pay their bills, or to help society or others. The objective was that there should be a kind of justice, a lawful/*halal* way of living. The most important thing was *hikma*, not just learning about Islam, but learning the essence of Islam, learning the essence of human life: what is the purpose of this way of life; what is the role I'm supposed play in this period of time I'm on this planet?

The Prophet (sal) once said, "***The hikam/wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he should find it, he should recover it.***" This group of people were there trying not to lose it; and whatever was lost, [they were there] to recover it. From the very, very beginning (forget about the Salafy or Wahabi mentality) in Medina, with Nebi Mohammed (sal) there was a group of people not unlike you. [They were] probably more motivated and certain more stimulated, because I'm 34 people removed from Prophet Mohammed (sal) in our line. And there is, as you know, a space in our line so there are even more years than that. They were right there with him, so there's a big difference. I'm not going to be able to motivate you the way they were motivated. That's why we have to motivate ourselves. We have to hear those stories and have the guidance of our *shaykh*, but we have to take a large responsibility for motivating ourselves.

If it is used correctly, if this room becomes really a *khanaqah*, a *zawiya*, a *tekkia*; if this community really is a *khanaqah*, a *zawiya*, a *tekkia*, then one naturally finds the balance of belief and faith and wisdom. One becomes really an example of spiritual rectitude. Your acts and their acts become acts of beauty—not just beauty in you, but beautification. Wherever you go, whatever you say, whatever you do beautifies the object of your words or actions, your acts of devotion. If we take the life of Rasulallah (sal) as a model to be followed, then we find that those rough edges in our own conduct are polished. The difficulties in our self are ameliorated. The accomplishment of the duties prescribed by

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

Islam becomes easy and meaningful. None of this has to do with learning some deep secret or *karamat*/performing miracles, or coercion (imposing one's will on others in the name of religion). It's not a result of being an ascetic or going into seclusion for your whole life, or even sitting in meditation 20 hours a day. Of course, some of these are means, but they are not ends. Rather, it's to understand that the Sufi, the mystic, is within Islamic law, within the guidelines, and in that, finds the beauty.

This word *ihsan* is a better word than mystic, *salik*, *sufi*. It's not limited, and tells you that the best individual is a person who acquires this beauty by having control over them self, by being sincere, by the realization of the presence of Allah Swt in every act and every thought, and by seeking the love of Allah Swt through His creation and through others, and in others, and for others, and by others, and by Allah in the beauty of His nature. Of course we all have duties to perform, prayers to make, charity to give. We all have to abstain from things that are tempting in certain ways, and control our anger and temperament. But there are internal responsibilities, too: faith, gratitude, sincerity, freedom from our *nafs*, self-respect. It is exactly why we have been at this for all these years in this training ground, this *zawiya*, this little room, and what this room represents in our homes and our lives.

Whatever motivates us externally, hopefully become something that is an agent for *tazkiyā*, the purification of our own self. What we develop by our practices is a much more sensitive faculty of perception, insight, understanding and peacefulness; and our capabilities and talents come forward. The average person looks and says, "How do you do that? How do you create this type of environment? How do you do the work that you do? How can you think the way you think?" The ego wants to say, that's just me. But it isn't just me. The 'just me' came with potential. The potential was developed because you are in the company of good people, and you are practicing something that is designed to bring out your talent, capability, insights, and beauty. It's not that we pursue that; it

Author: Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid www.circlegroup.org

comes naturally. In fact, we often disdain it. To be able to have insight and see things that are not visible to other people becomes possible, because we do certain practices that we can learn to love, to really embrace. One day we may realize, “How come I didn’t do this fully? What could have been on my mind that I allowed to distract me from this rare opportunity?”

Another analogy one could make is: that’s why the best-kept secrets are in public view. In public view, nobody wants to do it. “Here’s this meditation. Do you want to try it?” “Oh, yeah, yeah. I’ll try it.” People will spend 4 - 6 hours a day after work, in classes, memorizing and learning Hadith and *tafsir* of Hadith. This is fine, it’s wonderful. But to get the same person to sit [in *muraqabah*] twice a day for 40 minutes is impossible! They won’t do it. They’ll sit for 3-4 hours a night, after 8 hours or more a day working, to learn *things*; but won’t do the meditation to allow those *things* they are learning to become meaningful. Maybe it allows you to quote *hadith* and *tafsir*; maybe it makes you feel like you love the Prophet (sal) more, but you can’t understand it unless you internalize it. You won’t add 30 or 40 minutes twice a day for that? That’s people who are motivated to go and learn Hadith, not the average person who is only motivated to come home and have dinner, and reluctantly sit in *muraqabah*. You should hate the sleepiness. The more you hate the sleepiness, the more you love Allah.

The Allah you love is not a God somewhere else; it’s an opportunity to be awake and see the beauty and majesty of that Divine Presence. You’ll love being compassionate and merciful. You’ll love being a servant. You won’t want to do anything but that. Me chastising is not the point. The point is, don’t let yourself miss the opportunity. Because you, too, could be in the hospital with a mysterious disease, and you don’t know what to do. All of a sudden your mind is totally on your body, your illness—and what?

Everybody in this room is relatively healthy. There are some people who should be in this room who aren’t in this room because they are tired and had a long day. That’s okay;

go home, get rest. I'm not against rest. I tell people to rest all the time. "Get some sleep, you look tired." But have it right in your head.

These practices develop certain capabilities, certain wonderful abilities. If you acquire them, and you really, really understand them, then you become "agreeable to Allah." It means you become in resonance with Allah. Our outer and inner self needs to be beautified—our body and our soul. The acts of prayer, and the services and rituals belong in the realm of *fiqh*. But sincerity, love, devotion, and all the inner aspects of *muraqabah* and meditation belong in the realm of Tasawwuf. Allah says, **"Successful indeed are the believers who are devout in their prayers. Lo, the hypocrites when they stand up to perform worship perform it languidly and in ostentation so as to be observed by others."** Let's try to remember. The reason why I wanted to speak was I need the *suhbat*. I don't want to miss four days of *suhbat* in the company of hopefully pious people, at least the best that I can find in Bedford. *Asalāmu aleikum*.